

AN EXCEPTIONAL NATION?

The United States of America did not emerge as a nation until about 175 years after its establishment as a group of mostly British colonies. Yet from the beginning it was a different society in the eyes of many Europeans who viewed it from afar, whether with hope or apprehension. Most of its settlers — whether the younger sons of aristocrats, religious dissenters, or impoverished indentured servants — came there lured by a promise of opportunity or freedom not available in the Old World. The first Americans were reborn free, establishing themselves in a wilderness unencumbered by any social order other than that of the primitive aboriginal peoples they displaced. Having left the baggage of a feudal order behind them, they faced few obstacles to the development of a society built on the principles of political and social liberalism that emerged with difficulty in 17th- and 18th-century Europe. Based on the thinking of the philosopher John Locke, this sort of liberalism emphasized the rights of the individual and constraints on government power.

Most immigrants to America came from the British Isles, the most liberal of the European polities along with The Netherlands. In religion, the majority adhered to various forms of Calvinism with its emphasis on both divine and secular contractual relationships. These greatly facilitated the emergence of a social order built on individual rights and social mobility. The development of a more complex and highly structured commercial society in coastal cities by the mid-18th century did not stunt this trend; it was in these cities that the American Revolution was made. The constant reconstruction of society along an ever-receding Western frontier equally contributed to a liberal-democratic spirit.

In Europe, ideals of individual rights advanced slowly and unevenly; the concept of democracy was even more alien. The attempt to establish both in continental Europe's oldest nation led to the French Revolution. The effort to destroy a neofeudal society while establishing the rights of man and democratic fraternity generated terror, dictatorship, and Napoleonic despotism. In the end, it led to reaction and gave legitimacy to a decadent old order. In America, the European past was overwhelmed by ideals that sprang naturally from the process of building a new society on virgin land. The principles of liberalism and democracy were strong from the beginning. A society that had thrown off the burdens of European history would naturally give birth to a nation that saw itself as exceptional. ◆